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Spies, terrorists & US border

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A number of US officials are quietly warning that America's porous borders have become an open invitation to world terrorists and spies.

Officials are particularly troubled by the growing number of aliens filtering illegally into the United States from radical or communist nations, including Iran, China, Cuba, and Poland.

"We are worried about the national-security aspects," particularly communist infiltration, a federal intelligence specialist says.

Officials also warn that radical nations that support terrorism could easily slip saboteurs and assassins past the thinly guarded borders with either Mexico or Canada.

Not all intelligence experts share these worries.

William E. Colby, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, says America's very openness is a protection and a strength against spies. As for terrorism, he says, there is a basic rule: "If it gets serious, it gets suppressed — either decently, or indecently."

While terrorism could cause some disruption in the US, Mr. Colby says, he doubts that it poses a basic threat to the

nature of American society.

Still, several developments have added to the anxiety being expressed here by some government sources:

- "Thousands and thousands" of official American passports have been stolen over a period of months from US embassies in the Mideast, Africa, and East Asia. Presumably, most of these passports will be sold on the black market to people who wish to work in the US. But many could be used to smuggle terrorists and spies into this country. "It's frightening," a federal intelligence official says.

- Illegal immigration from Mexico has surged by 50 percent in the past few months. Resources of the US Border Patrol are being severely strained.

- "Narco-terrorism" is increasing. The recent assassination of a US drug informant in Baton Rouge, La., by a Colombian hit squad that entered this country illegally could signal stepped-up criminal terror. The killers slipped into the US at the Mexico-California border.

- Document forgery has become more sophisticated. Recently, two heroin smugglers arrested in Miami were found to possess phony security badges, complete with photos and validation, for Miami International Airport.

Sen. Barry Goldwater (R) of Arizona, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, says the evidence causes him "concern." Sen. Alan K. Simpson (R) of Wyoming says: "You could take a crack outfit of 100 people, sprinkle them in through the borders . . . and they could meet at some predetermined point. [They could] pick up their equipment on this side of the border. . . . We wouldn't even know what was going on."

Amitai Etzioni, director of the Center for Policy Research at George Washington University, says Americans seem asleep to the threat that "able-bodied spies" can cross the Rio Grande as easily as maids seeking work in Texas border towns.

"We still haven't adapted from the 18th-century notion that we are safe, and nobody can lay a glove on us — that the oceans will protect us," says Dr. Etzioni.

US Customs Commissioner William von Raab warns that Mexican law-enforcement officials are being corrupted by drug smugglers. He adds that Mexican "law enforcement . . . can just as easily be bought by terrorists." He calls the breakdown of law enforcement a "serious national-security concern." And he observes: "This is a terrorist threat by every definition."

Sen. Malcolm Wallop (R) of Wyoming notes: "The border is indefensible against deliberate peasants who simply want a better life. . . . Think what happens when the PLO trains little teams to come into this country, like they have in Israel, and destroy a schoolbus full of children, or senior citizens on holiday, or blow up a bridge." He warns that eventually, terrorism could undermine "the freedoms that we take for granted."

There are no easy answers to all of this, the experts say. Dr. Etzioni says the immediate need is to educate the American

public to the threats of the late 20th century, when jet travel and other modern devices shrink the time it takes to move around the world.

Senator Simpson, at a breakfast meeting with reporters, fretted that it may take some terrible terrorist attack to awaken the US.

Patrick Burns, a researcher for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, says the terrorist and spy problem defies easily solution. Immigration reform will help, but it's not the complete answer.

Alan Nelson, commissioner of the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), says there has been some talk about "building a wall" along the 2,000-mile southern border with Mexico to counter terrorism. "I don't think that's very wise, or very practical," he says. But he considers the situation serious. US intelligence agents report that aliens from 82 nations have been detected crossing the Mexican border in the past year.

"We have been working closely with the other agencies in this whole antiterrorism campaign," Mr. Nelson says. "Clearly, the ability of terrorists to get through the southern border is a fact we have to be alert to."

Immigration officials say the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, and Interpol issue alerts to INS border guards when it is known that specific terrorists are trying to slip into the country.

But a federal intelligence expert asks: "How many of them come in under their own names, with their own legitimate passports? It obviously doesn't always work."

The issue of spies and terrorism is complicated by the millions of people who attempt to enter the US illegally for jobs each year.

An immigration official in Los Angeles says federal agents are so busy (1.8 million arrests are predicted this year along the Mexican border) that "the chances of checking people out in any detail is almost impossible." The problem appears to be worsening. The smuggling of people into the US has become a booming business in Asia, Europe, and Latin America. For a charge of \$4,000 to \$5,000, smugglers arrange illegal visas and other documents necessary for entry.

A telegram sent last year from INS headquarters to its field offices around the world illustrates the sophistication of the smugglers. The telegram said a Philippine smuggling syndicate had begun to move Filipinos through Europe, and then into East Coast US cities, rather than the traditional West Coast entry points. It explained that the syndicate "is using East Coast ports of entry for its clients because INS on the East Coast, particularly New York, is allegedly less vigilant against fraudulent Philippine travel documents."

Gary Imhoff, who writes on immigration matters, cautions that the US displays an "arrogant assumption of our own invulnerability." He then adds: "Guarding a nation's border is a single, seamless job. The borders cannot remain open to illegal immigration and still be guarded against smuggling and terrorists."